

# Feathers, Flowers, Talons, and Fangs: Power and Serenity in Japanese Nature Prints

The **RISD** Museum



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# Feathers, Flowers, Talons, and Fangs:

## Power and Serenity in Japanese Nature Prints

### Cultural Sources

**Fierce tigers and awe-inspiring dragons**—these subjects hardly seem to fit into the same category as delicate songbirds like the nightingale and blossoms as ephemeral as the cherry. Even so, a wide array of flora and fauna and bugs and beasts appears in Japanese prints of the genre traditionally called “birds and flowers” (*kachō*). These Edo-period prints (1603–1867) reflect the profound Japanese appreciation for the natural world.

The Japanese aesthetic response to nature was prompted in part by an ancient religious understanding of cosmic forces. Indigenous Shintō belief held that the universe is permeated by *kami*, the spirit of the sacred. This spirit could temporarily inhabit elements of the natural world, such as trees, rocks, waterfalls, or specific locales. Shintō’s animist teachings were later reinforced by Buddhism, which was transmitted from China and Korea in the sixth century. The Buddhist respect for all life integrated well with this aspect of Shintō. Together, such tenets laid the foundation for the responses to nature expressed in Japanese poetry of the Nara (710–94) and Heian (794–1185) periods, when religious and aesthetic sentiment gradually combined to inspire its lyric imagery. These poetic responses, in turn, permeated the culture, defining a unique vocabulary of textual and visual imagery fundamental to the arts and literature of Japan.

In *Man’yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, compiled ca. 760), the earliest anthology of Japanese *waka* (a five-line, thirty-one-syllable lyric verse form), the poets’ encounters with nature are already infused with a combination of religious and aesthetic feeling. By the early 10th century, with the compilation of the first imperial anthology of *waka* poetry, *Kokinshū* (*Collection of Ancient and Modern Times*, begun 905), the texts

are explicitly arranged according to seasonal and thematic categories. Ki no Tsurayuki, in the “Japanese Preface” to the anthology, canonizes the lyrical component of traditional *waka*, the source for later poetic forms such as the three-line, seventeen-syllable *haiku*:

The seeds of Japanese poetry [*yamato uta*] lie in the human heart and grow into leaves of ten thousand words. Many things happen to the people of this world, and all that they think and feel is given expression in description of things they see and hear. When we hear the warbling of the mountain thrush in the blossoms or the voice of the frog in the water, we know every living being has its song. . . .

(*Ki no Tsurayuki* (d. 945?), “*Kanajo: The Japanese Preface*,” *Kokinshū: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern*, translated and annotated by Laurel Rasplica Rodd with Mary Catherine Henkenius, *Princeton Library of Asian Translations*. Princeton: 1984, p. 35.)

The imagery codified in this anthology became basic to the Japanese poetic vocabulary, which makes extensive use of the associations of birds and flowers with the seasons and with other themes such as love, parting, and the passage of time. The refined aesthetic and emotive responses of the Heian-period poets also became the vocabulary of Japanese visual artists, infusing the paintings and applied-arts objects of the Heian and subsequent periods with the same expressive meanings.

### Subject Matter

In the visual arts, representations of birds and flowers are known from as early as the Kofun period (250–552). By the Asuka (552–645) and early Nara periods (646–710), the wholesale importation into Japan of Buddhism and the borrowing of a wide repertory of bird-and-flower themes from





**Cover:**

Katsushika Hokusai  
Japanese, 1760-1849  
*Cuckoo and Azaleas*,  
from the untitled set of  
10 prints known as the  
"Small Flowers" series,  
ca. 1834

Polychrome woodblock  
print (*nishiki-e*),  
9 13/16 x 7 3/8 in.  
Gift of Mrs. John D.  
Rockefeller, Jr.  
34.486.2

**Fig. 1**

Katsushika Hokusai  
Japanese, 1760-1849  
*Cranes and Pines in  
Snow*, from an untitled  
set of 5 bird-and-flower  
prints published by  
Moriya Jihei, ca. 1834  
Polychrome woodblock  
print (*nishiki-e*),  
20 1/8 x 9 5/16 in.  
(image)

Gift of Mrs. John D.  
Rockefeller, Jr.  
34.496



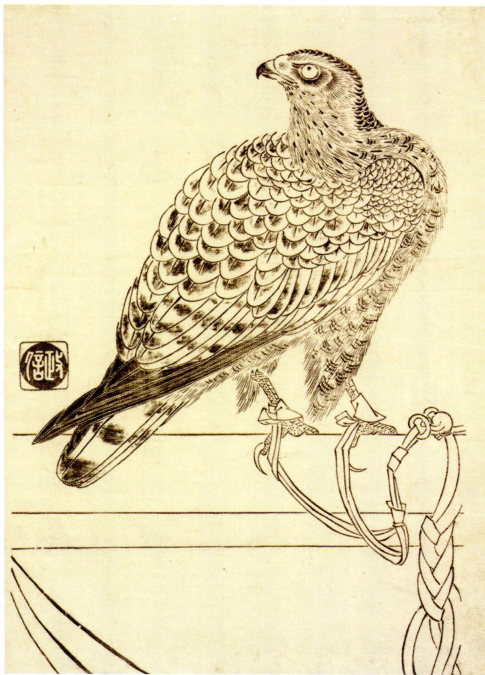
**Fig. 2**  
 Okumura Masanobu  
 Japanese, 1686-1784  
*Goshawk Tethered to a Perch*, 1710-19  
 Monochrome wood-  
 block print (*sumizuri-e*),  
 16 3/8 x 11 3/4 in.  
 Gift of Mrs. John D.  
 Rockefeller, Jr.  
 34.443

China resulted in frequent use of these motifs as subordinate or decorative elements in painting and on applied-arts objects. The subject gradually became an independent genre of painting, and the numerous stylistic and representational modes seen in the prints on view reflect the popularization in painting of *kachō* themes.

The establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate's political authority in Edo (pre-modern Tokyo) in 1603 began the extended peace of the Edo period. Social and economic changes in Japanese society during this era led to the creation of a new class of "townsmen" (*chōnin*) consisting primarily of merchants and artisans. Although marginalized within the society as a whole due to their low position in the social hierarchy, this increasingly affluent group supported new art forms that reflected their aesthetic preferences and urban lifestyle. Members of the hereditary warrior class, the *samurai*, also enjoyed these urban pleasures and pastimes and eventually became active participants in that culture. The extensive patronage of this new social class was directly linked to the popularity of the *kabuki* theater and its famed actors and to the renown of the teahouses and

courtesans of the entertainment districts in Japan's urban centers. These were an inherent part of the culture of the "floating world," an imaginary realm of "artistic experience and ephemeral love" associated with the pleasure quarters (Christine Guth, *Art of Edo Japan: The Artist and the City*, 1615-1868. New York: 1996, p. 29). This "floating world," in turn, inspired and was crucial to the evolution of the rich printmaking tradition so closely identified with it.

The new urban culture began to coalesce in Edo in the later 17th century, and along with it the Japanese artistic tradition known as *ukiyo-e* ("pictures of the floating world"). The subject matter of *ukiyo-e* printmaking is most often associated with actors and courtesans, and with the *kabuki* theater and the pleasure quarters frequented by entertainers and prostitutes. Eventually, landscapes and historical and legendary narratives were added into the mix. Bird-and-flower subjects were not initially part of the mainstream tradition, although examples do begin to appear sporadically from the early years of the 18th century [fig. 2]. This genre took tentative shape during the last four decades of that century, a time of artistic experimentation. Birds and flowers began to receive more consistent treatment simultaneously with the appearance of polychrome or multiple-woodblock prints (called *nishiki-e*, or "brocade prints") around 1765; but the subject only became firmly established in the second quarter of the 19th century. Both Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) [cover; fig. 1, p. 2] and, more especially, Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) [figs. 3, 5, 7, 8] introduced it into their expanded thematic repertory in the decade of the 1830s. This development, which overlapped with the growing popularity of landscape prints created by these two great masters, extended the limits of *ukiyo-e* far beyond the subject matter that initially defined it.





### Stylistic and Representational Sources

In the later 17th century, *ukiyo-e* prints drew upon books and paintings of the “floating world” for their inspiration. Bird-and-flower prints, too, were patterned upon a variety of sources in the broader culture, including Chinese and Japanese painting, Chinese prints, and Chinese and Japanese printed books. The influence of Chinese printing became gradually more widespread from 1720, when the ban on importation of foreign books was lifted (with the exception of those dealing with Christianity). Chinese printed books and sheets introduced Japanese publishers to Chinese printing techniques, including color and gradation printing and embossing, all of which were more sophisticated than the processes in use in Japan. In addition, these materials provided new sources for subject matter and content based upon recent Chinese models. Well-known Chinese texts were republished by the Japanese; an important example being the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (*Jiezi yuan hua zhuan*, issued in series in China in 1679 and 1701) [fig. 4], parts of which were printed in Japan as *Kaishien gaden* in 1748 and 1753. These served as rich resources for Japanese painters and printmakers. The Japanese eventually appropriated this category of book, evolving “picture albums” (*gafu*) so that the work of Japanese painters could be disseminated in the form of printed books as well.

Chinese paintings had been imported into Japan from as early as the Nara period. By the early Edo period, that rich ink-painting tradition had been transmitted, absorbed, and developed by Japanese painters for hundreds of years. In the 18th century, however, the influx of a new generation of Chinese artists into the port city of Nagasaki encouraged the spread of a brightly colored and vividly naturalistic late Ming (1368–1644) painting style that differed markedly from earlier models. This so-called Nagasaki school is regarded as playing an important role in the formation of the Edo-period *kachō* painting tradition. Other Japanese painting schools also evolved specific models for handling this subject matter.



**Fig. 3**  
Utagawa Hiroshige  
Japanese, 1797–1858  
*Swallows and Peach Blossoms under a Full Moon*, 1830–39  
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*) with embossing, 14 1/4 x 7 1/8 in. (image)  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.  
34.286

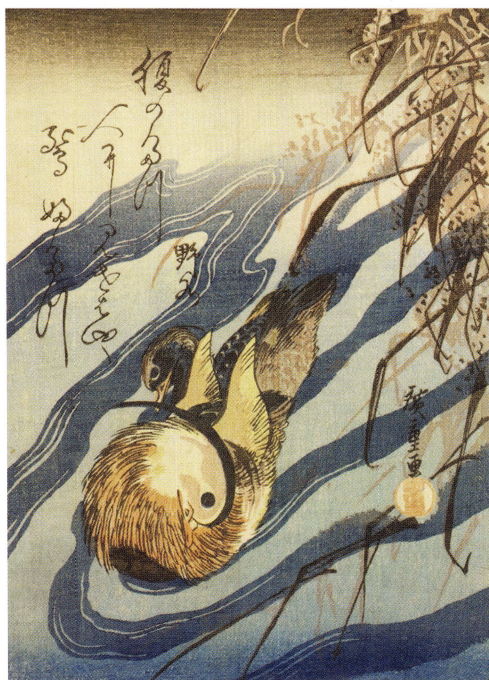


**Fig. 4**  
Chinese, Qing dynasty, 1644–1911  
*Orchids, Butterfly, and Rock*, page from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (*Jiezi yuan hua zhuan*), possibly 1701 edition  
Polychrome woodblock print, 10 1/2 x 12 1/4 in.  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.  
34.610





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The decorative Rinpa tradition, for example, is associated with abstract patterning of the painting surface and a tilted-up ground plane, reflected here in a Hiroshige print [fig. 5]. Even more important for the development of Hiroshige's work is Shijō painting. Hiroshige drew upon the evocative sensibility and lyricism of this school for the delicacy of expression so frequently seen in his art [fig. 7]. These newer modes of representation gradually appeared in bird-and-flower prints, which, by the 19th century, reflect the influence of a broad spectrum of painting styles.

### Interpretation

The earliest publications of polychrome woodblock prints in the later 18th century were associated with Edo poetry societies, which commissioned such works as calendar prints (*egoyomi*). Suzuki Harunobu (1724-70), who is credited with the creation of these colored "brocade prints," was also the first print designer whose sheets incorporated poetry and frequently made use of classical literary allusions. By about 1788-90, Kitagawa



Utamaro (1753?-1806) had produced his three famous albums on the subjects of insects, shells, and birds, respectively. Several pages from the last of these, *Myriad Birds: A Kyōka Competition* (*Momo chidori kyōka awase*) are included in the exhibition (fig. 6). The playful, thirty-one-syllable *kyōka* (“witty verse”) poems that appeared with the illustrations set the tone for appreciating the images in these collections. *Kyōka*, a verse form derived from classical *waka* poetry, had spread from Kyoto and Osaka to Edo, where it grew in popularity and became the focus of poetry-writing competitions and poetry societies beginning in the later 18th century.

Educated townsmen and the cultivated elite of Edo-period Japan were familiar with the lyrical vocabulary of classical Japanese poetics and applied their understanding of that tradition to their reading of the prints. The typically close interdependence between inscribed text and printed image, which may sometimes be clever and playful in tone, has its source in that residual classical tradition and the Edo-period cultural milieu that transformed it. In addition to *kyōka*, two other categories of verse are found on these prints. *Haiku*, a seventeen-syllable verse form also derived from *waka*, assumed a major place in Edo literary practice in the 17th century, when poets such as Matsuo Bashō (1644-94) transformed it [fig. 8, p. 7]. Chinese poetry (*kanshi*) also appears [fig. 3, p. 4]. In the examples in this exhibition, most of the texts are actually quoted from Chinese sources, but sometimes the Japanese also wrote poetry in classical Chinese. In the most effective combinations of poetry and image, literary allusions not only provide a means of interpreting the print, but also skillfully evoke layered associations to enhance its visual content.

In addition to literary themes, traditional symbolic associations also provide keys to unraveling meaning. The pine is associated with winter, longevity, and endurance; cherry blossoms with spring, transience, and the shortness of a deceased young warrior’s life. Falling within this category is a body of auspicious imagery, some of



**Fig. 5**  
Utagawa Hiroshige  
Japanese, 1797-1858  
*Mandarin Ducks in a Stream*, 1830-39  
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*),  
9 1/8 x 6 9/16 in.  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.  
34.348

**Fig. 6**  
Kitagawa Utamaro  
Japanese, 1753?-1806  
*Goshawk, Thick-Billed Shrike (Taka, mozu)*,  
from *Myriad Birds: A Kyōka Competition*  
(*Momo chidori kyōka awase*), ca. 1790  
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*),  
9 3/16 x 14 11/16 in. (image)  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.  
38.008

**Fig. 7**  
Utagawa Hiroshige  
Japanese, 1797-1858  
*Dragonfly and Begonia*, 1830-39  
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)  
with embossing,  
15 1/8 x 5 1/16 in.  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.  
34.225



**Fig. 8**

Utagawa Hiroshige  
Japanese, 1797-1858  
*Black-Naped Oriole*  
and *Rose Mallow*,  
1830-39  
Polychrome woodblock  
print (*nishiki-e*)  
with embossing,  
15 1/8 x 5 1/16 in.  
(image)  
Gift of Mrs. John D.  
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34.238

**Fig. 9**

Formerly attributed  
to Suzuki Harunobu,  
possibly by Isoda  
Koryūsai?  
Japanese  
*Cat, Butterfly, and*  
*Begonias*, ca. 1767  
Polychrome woodblock  
print (*nishiki-e*)  
with embossing,  
11 1/8 x 8 5/16 in.  
(image)  
Gift of Mrs. John D.  
Rockefeller, Jr.  
34.421



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which was imported into Japan from China beginning in the 6th century. The print of a *Cat, Butterfly, and Begonias* [fig. 9] derives its meaning from the association of two words in Chinese: together they connote longevity. In both cultures, pines signify the New Year and cranes wishes for long life [fig. 1, p. 2]. The symbolic meanings are often part of the poetic tradition as well, and taken as a whole this unique vocabulary of textual allusions and visual conventions is basic to understanding these artworks.

By highlighting the bird-and-flower tradition in this exhibition, we hope to bring fresh attention to an understudied category of Japanese woodblock printing. The selection of approximately 60 works is drawn from the gift to the Museum of about 720 outstanding bird-and-flower prints donated by Mrs. John D. (Abby Aldrich) Rockefeller, Jr., in 1934/38. We invite you to savor the lush visual content of these wonderful prints and enrich your understanding of the world of *ukiyo-e*.

DEBORAH DEL GAIS  
*Curator of Asian Art, The RISD Museum*

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